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# Fresh Peaches

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Flying Medical Service

## TANZANIA

Ndepayan's husband was killed while working as night watchman in Nairobi several years ago. His death left her destitute and alone in raising three kids, two of whom have major health problems. She hardly had money to feed herself, let alone her three young children, and she had absolutely no money for health care. In her desperation she did the only thing she could think of: she hid the sick ones away.

I don't remember how she found us. One day they were just here. She and her children, all in tattered clothes, just showed up at our door. The 11-year-old, Naramat, her oldest child, helped her carry Losieku, the youngest of the three. This small boy was born with spina bifida, a horrible birth defect that leaves the spinal cord uncovered. Tagging along behind, her second child, Loewuo, was drooling from the side of his mouth. Apparently born healthy, early on he started having severe and prolonged seizures, sometimes three in one day. Now his blank expressionless face held the look of a child who had suffered from years of serious epilepsy.

### She wanted her children well

She said, "I heard that you can sometimes help people." I said, "Yes, sometimes we can." She didn't ask for money, clothes or food. She wanted her children well. These two sick children, Loewuo with the seizures, Losieku with the spina bifida, were far too ill for us to treat at our small dispensary. But by chance, late the following morning, the aircraft would be flying empty to one of the only two hospitals in Tanzania with a neurosurgeon. I asked her to be here early and told her it would not cost her anything. The expenses of the one-hour flight were already covered by the hospital which needed the plane's services later in the day.

### Three hours late

She arrived here three hours after the plane had left.

Although I shouldn't have been upset, I was frustrated with her for losing such a good chance. She let me tell her how disappointed I was. Then she simply said,

"I'm sorry" and started to walk away. I followed her.

I wanted to know why she would waste such an opportunity. She answered quietly, "We live high up the mountain. I was awake before dawn trying to get the children ready. Then we started walking at the first light of day. But Loewuo had a seizure and we had to wait for him. Then he was so tired and weak that he could only walk short distances before resting. I had to help him stand up and push him forward to start him walking again. Although I saw we would be late, I so badly wanted the children to be treated that I continued on, thinking perhaps the plane would still be here."

### On time two weeks later

Even though she had missed that flight, two weeks later the plane was making another trip to the same hospital and the visiting neurosurgeon was still there. This time, leaving the 11-year-old daughter at home to take care of the cow and the goats, Ndepayan and her two sick children didn't miss the flight.

That was four weeks ago and today they are back. Loewuo's suspected epilepsy was not epilepsy but a rarer disease of the mitochondria in the cells. Even in Europe or America the prognosis is bad; but high-line anti-epileptic drugs do reduce his seizures. Losieku's spina bifida is skillfully closed up and he is growing so fast that in a short time his mother will not be able to carry him. We'll have a physiotherapist and an orthopedic specialist work with him; and with their help he will soon take his first step. We believe that with the aid of crutches he will be able to walk alone.

Ndepayan brought me some fresh peaches from her tree. ■

## Exotic, eh?

No matter how long I live here in Endulen, I never seem to grow weary of the local sights.

This afternoon on the way to the hospital, I passed a long line of donkeys, driven by boys and girls and carrying grain to Maasai villages far out in the bush. Having bought the corn at the local shops here, they started off on a trip of a number of days to reach their homes down on the edge of the Eastern Serengeti. They laughed and called to each other as they went, untroubled by the prospect of the thirsty and hungry journey ahead.

A little farther on, a warthog ran across the track in front of the car, proudly holding his tussled tail at full mast. Two giraffes stood in the shade of a tall Acacia tree with their long necks bowed and their eyes closed. Some hundreds of yards further on was a herd of zebra, forced to leave the plains of the Serengeti, now a desert. They were getting little in the way of grass here in the Ngogongoro highland.

It is almost as dry here as it is on the Serengeti, visible in shimmering waves of dust far below us. Just before arriving at the hospital, we passed a small herd of impala listlessly scratching for what grass they could find in the virtual dust bowl that Endulen has become during the dry season.

— Ned Marchessault CSSp

